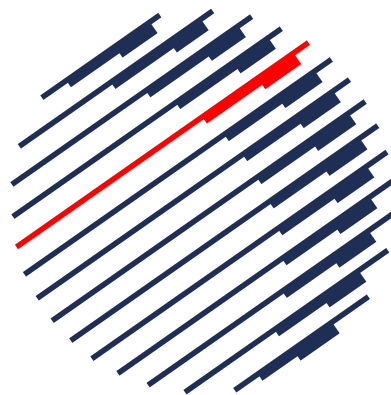


How Reforms Facilitate Central Asia's Rise to International Prominence



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Executive Summary

Central Asian states have sought to connect themselves to global markets and chart their own path to prosperity ever since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Landlocked and squeezed between neighbors that are both powerful (like Russia and China) and unpredictable (like Iran and Afghanistan), the region has seen its share of competition and dissonance—sometimes resulting in outbursts of violence. This meant that any road to development would require a significant degree of maneuvering and balancing among an array of internal and external dangers. Additionally, it meant that whenever stability and progress came close to colliding, stability would normally hold the upper hand. Central Asia thus found itself in a dilemma of needing to move away from the old Soviet system in order to foster growth and not being able to undertake decisive efforts at reform due to its own fragility.

Nevertheless, the countries of Central Asia have all achieved tangible economic progress in their post-Soviet days. Kazakhstan, as the region's centerpiece and largest economy, reached a GDP growth of more than seven times its size in 1991—from a mere \$25 billion to \$182 billion in 2019 under the leadership of its first president Nursultan Nazarbayev. Similarly, Uzbekistan, the most populous country of Central Asia, reached the peak of its development in 2016, right before the death of its long-serving leader Islam Karimov. While much can be said about the ways in which economic growth and development is possible without substantial political reform, such systems are destined to eventually face rising inequality and stagnation. Without exception, this materialized in every state of the region, which threatened to sow long-term instability. However, it also ushered in an era in which Central Asian elites started to realize the growing danger to their own survival and that of their respective societies. A clear-cut choice was before them: end their political careers in infamy and watch their beloved countries unravel, or engage in reform that is all but certain to reap far-reaching benefits, including for themselves. They chose the latter and they chose wisely.

When Kassym-Jomart Tokayev became president of Kazakhstan in 2019, he began to introduce new reform packages every couple of months. New freedoms started to emerge and public space began to open up for greater participation of all levels of society. Freedom of protest that was on the verge of non-existent and required explicit approval from the authorities, was now being introduced as a readily available option. Political participation had become much easier, both in terms of one's ability to form a political party and to directly elect representatives at the local level. Significant strides were made on political participation of women and the protection of children in society. Finally, Tokayev put forward a series of constitutional changes in 2022 that signaled Kazakhstan's drift away from the super-presidential system and toward a parliamentary republic that places more constraints on the head of state. As a testament to his reformist resolve, he even imposed definitive limits on the presidential term, preventing any prospective Kazakh president from serving more than one 7-year term in office.

In neighboring Uzbekistan, society has undergone similar transformation, with the two Central Asian countries frequently serving as role models for each other and following in the footsteps of their neighbor's reforms. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev inherited a deeply authoritarian system in 2016. In the span of five years, Uzbekistan's new president divorced the country from the practices of his predecessor, paving the way for greater investment and growth. Uzbekistan improved its relations with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, with which Tashkent was far too often on the edge of open conflict. The country abolished its system of exit visas and opened itself up for visa-free tourism from a host of countries, which quickly generated near-universal approval. Domestically, Mirziyoyev's signature moves included his "Action Strategy" aimed at developing the economy and fighting corruption for the period between 2017 and 2021, the "Concept" of administrative reform, and a Program on legal and judicial reform. He further endeavored to eradicate forced labor, which too was praised as one of his great accomplishments. Interestingly enough, Mirziyoyev's policies include the recognition that the central government is not all-knowing. In implementing his reform agenda, Uzbekistan's top executive sees a constructive role to be played by civil society, whose functioning, and the ability to register with the authorities has been made much easier in recent years.

Welcome as they may be, these reforms are not all-encompassing, nor can they be observed independently of international events—much like the economies and systems they are striving to improve. Suffice it to say, Russia's decision to launch what it continues to call a "special military operation" in Ukraine has had a significant impact on Central Asia. Unsurprisingly, Kazakhstan has been most affected by these developments. As a country that shares 7,644 kilometers of border with Russia, Kazakhstan is feeling the full weight of the Western sanctions imposed on Moscow. The severity of barriers limiting Russian energy exports has driven food prices throughout Central Asia through the roof. What is more, Central Asian economies remain both heavily intertwined with Russia's—which increases the risk of and exposure to secondary Western sanctions—and dependent on remittances coming from their Russia-based diaspora. Another problem poses the influx of Russians fleeing mobilization, who are placing additional strains on the region's economies and their job markets.

Not all effects of the global turmoil in 2022 have been negative, however. The crippling sanctions have all but completely closed off all west-bound routes for Russian goods. This leaves Moscow with the option to make the best use of its southern neighborhood and corridors, which presents Central Asia with great opportunities to position itself as the centerpiece of Eurasian trade and transport. Moreover, the risk of total isolation that Moscow faces, and its complete resource commitment to the military effort in Ukraine, tip the scales of this relationship in Central Asia's favor. The region's countries are in a unique position to make demands from their Russian partners, for Russia could not inflict any meaningful damage on its southern neighbors—be it in security or economic terms. Any attempt to do so would drive a wedge between the parties and is almost certain to accelerate the increasingly evident Chinese foothold in the region. This too would come at the expense of Russia's longstanding presence in Central Asia.

China is looking to play an important role in the region, first and foremost as an economic giant, but increasingly as a security guarantor as well. Chinese President Xi Jinping seized the opportunity to visit Astana on his first international trip since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic¹, where he pledged support to Kazakhstan's territorial integrity "no matter how the international situation changes"². Secondly, the People's Republic is exploiting its technological clout to make a positive impact on Central Asian development. It is signing long-term deals with the region's countries, pledging billions of dollars of investment in the coming years³. Finally, it makes additional use of global predicaments in 2022 to gain quick access to other markets via Central Asia, the region which Beijing has already tied to itself through its infrastructure mega-project: the Belt and Road Initiative.

Sandwiched between China and Russia, Central Asian economies have explored other avenues to their advantage, building on the momentum of their liberalized markets and fresh investment-driving legislation. During this year's United Nations General Assembly, Tokayev used his visit to New York to meet with dozens of representatives of American business elites and discuss investment in Kazakhstan. In an effort to secure energy sources ahead of an uncertain winter, EU officials including the President of the European Council Charles Michel and High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borell paid visits to Central Asia in October and November 2022, respectively. Accordingly, Mirziyoyev has been building on his efforts to secure more investment from the Gulf countries, more specifically the United Arab Emirates. While the revival of large-scale interstate conflict on the European continent may have rattled the world, one should not forgo an old idiom, which says that there is opportunity in every crisis. If this one may be judged by its early stages, Central Asia is giving its all to become this crisis' principal beneficiary.

No reform is ever truly complete. There are no definitive social processes either. Even more true is that no such processes are ever infallible. Central Asian reforms are a work in progress, and even if their yield ends up being high, there is still lots of room for improvement. As this study attempts to demonstrate in its analysis of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, there are areas that the two countries have not addressed adequately. Nonetheless, the impact of what has been done thus far is here for us to dissect, analyze, and learn from. The results of the reforms may be judged relative to what they have set to accomplish, what we feel would be ideal, or what the situation was prior to their initiation. In any event, the level of activity emanating from Central Asia provides a handful of topics that demand the attention of all who care about the future of global development.

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- 1 Amy Gunia, "Xi Jinping's Choice of Kazakhstan for His First Overseas Trip Since the Pandemic Is Highly Significant" *Time*, September 14, 2022 (<https://time.com/6212887/xi-jinping-kazakhstan-china-trip/>)
 - 2 Asim Kashgarian, "China's Xi Kicks Off Central Asia Trip With Visits to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan" *Voice of America*, September 14, 2022 (<https://www.voanews.com/a/china-xi-kicks-off-central-asia-trip-with-visits-to-kazakhstan-uzbekistan/6747766.html>)
 - 3 "Uzbekistan signs large deals with China, Russia," *Reuters*, September 16, 2022 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/uzbekistan-signs-large-deals-with-china-russia-2022-09-16/>)

The Age of Reform

Kazakhstan

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, it left behind not one, but a series of broken economic and political systems. These separate systems were suddenly out on their own, seemingly free to chart their destiny in whatever way they saw fit. Yet, their elites, administrations, and populations knew nothing about this new free-market capitalist world, having spent their entire lives in a state-controlled economy and top-heavy bureaucracy. Eager to seize new opportunities that held out a promise of galloping growth, each of the newly independent Central Asian republics worked with what was at their disposal. In most cases, these were abundant hydrocarbon resources that they could now sell on the international market. This enabled a stream of international revenue that further allowed for improved public services, diversification of economic sectors, and above all, improved living standards. With enough money flowing in, the region's governments could keep their populations happy and the economy growing. As long as this was the case, it kept on setting the stage for the policy that most transitional economies initially go through: "economy first, then politics"⁴.

In Kazakhstan's early days of independence—Central Asia's largest country and economy—having an economy-oriented process of gradual reform was perhaps the only option. Every attempt to immediately impose a western-style democracy would prove a difficult endeavor that could hardly reconcile the needs and priorities of about 130 ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan⁵. The country's first president Nursultan Nazarbayev mobilized the production of fossil fuels, which gradually propelled Kazakhstan's GDP to a stunning \$236.63 billion in 2013⁶. Nazarbayev attempted to seize the momentum of the early 2010s, announcing his signature "Kazakhstan 2050" Strategy. The strategy promised modernization, "comprehensive support for entrepreneurship", and what the document referenced as "all-around economic pragmatism"⁷. While this comprehensive program involved an idea of "Sustainable Process of Democratization and Liberalization"⁸, Nazarbayev remained cautious about fully pursuing a transition to liberal democracy. In the years that followed, problems with systemic corruption, failures to produce greater diversity of enterprise, and the unchanging prevalence of state-owned sector resulted in somewhat of an economic stagnation⁹. The absence of political reform and reluctance in building a stronger institutional framework only added to the growing impression that further progress cannot be contained solely to the domain of economics.

4 Address by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Leader of the Nation, N.Nazarbayev "Strategy Kazakhstan-2050": new political course of the established state" — Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (akorda.kz)

5 Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Ethnic groups" (<https://kazakhembus.com/about-kazakhstan/culture/ethnic-groups>)

6 Trading Economics, Kazakhstan GDP, (<https://tradingeconomics.com/kazakhstan/gdp>)

7 Address by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Leader of the Nation, N.Nazarbayev "Strategy Kazakhstan-2050": new political course of the established state" — Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (akorda.kz)

8 Ibid

9 Aimar Ventsel, "Kazakhstan in Stagnation", International Centre for Defence and Security, March 19, 2019, <https://icds.ee/en/kazakhstan-in-stagnation/>

Irrespective of his fears of losing control of the state—and efforts to alleviate them—the sheer reality of Nazarbayev’s age suggested that his time of departure was approaching. However, when such a time finally arrived in 2019, the elites opted for what then seemed an orderly transition with full honors for the aging statesman. Nazarbayev withdrew from the hectic theater of daily politics, only to be appointed head of the National Security Council with a right to overturn all actions of the government. In the eyes of many experts at the time, this signaled that there would be no reformist (or any other) shift away from Nazarbayev’s policies. In fact, the director of the now defunct Carnegie Moscow Center Dmitri Trenin argued that the Kazakh leader “[...] is not stepping down, he is stepping up; he will oversee a power transition over the next few years”, and that this “[...] is likely to be used in due course in Russia by Vladimir Putin”¹⁰. But once Nazarbayev resigned, space indeed opened for the expansion of reforms to other, previously untouched areas.

The first glimpse of significant shifts on the political reform front occurred in December 2019, when newly elected president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced his first package of reforms during a meeting of the National Council of Public Trust¹¹. The crux of this reform was the right of assembly and protest, which had previously required the explicit approval of the authorities. The second meaningful measure was the reduction of the party registration barrier from the previously required 40,000 to 20,000 and the introduction of the 30 percent quota for women¹². In a series of reforms that Tokayev kept announcing twice a year on average, he introduced the direct election of *akims* (the equivalent of mayors) of rural districts, the law on public control, and the improvement in the conduct of online petitions. Furthermore, a special area was dedicated to human rights, more specifically the protection of children online¹³.

When it comes to reforming the election process, Tokayev’s new measures included lowering the threshold for entering the Majilis (the Lower House of Parliament), from 7 to 5 percent, adding the option to opt against all on an election ballot, and the introduction of district *akims*¹⁴. Even in the absence of direct implementation, Tokayev used his public appearances and state of the nation addresses to announce plans and next steps on political and rule-of-law reform. In one such instance, the Kazakh head of state laid out a plan for post-Covid-19 pandemic recovery, addressed the shortcomings on the labor market, and vowed to accelerate political modernization and protect human rights¹⁵. As a highlight of the address, he underlined the steps already taken towards improving the

10 Alexander Kruglov, “Kazakhstan’s big boss steps down – but in name only”, *Asia Times*, April 6, 2019 (<https://asiatimes.com/2019/04/kazakhstan-big-boss-steps-down-but-in-name-only/>)

11 Assel Satubaldina, “Kazakh President announces major political reforms package”, *Astana Times*, December 21, 2019, (<https://astanatimes.com/2019/12/kazakh-president-announces-major-political-reforms-package/>)

12 Albert Barro, Svante E. Cornell, *Social Reforms in Kazakhstan*, Silk Road Paper, September 2022 (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/220920-Kazakh.pdf>)

13 Erlan Karin, “New Package of Political Reforms Introduced in Kazakh President’s State of the Nation Address”, *Astana Times*, September 20, 2021 (<https://astanatimes.com/2021/09/new-package-of-political-reforms-introduced-in-kazakh-presidents-state-of-the-nation-address/>)

14 Aidana Yergalieva, “Kazakh President Proposes to Reduce Threshold for Political Parties, Sets Priorities for 2021”, *Astana Times*, January 15, 2021 (<https://astanatimes.com/2021/01/kazakh-president-proposes-to-reduce-threshold-for-political-parties-sets-priorities-for-2021/>)

15 “State of the Nation Address by President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev”, Akorda.kz. Republic of Kazakhstan, September 1, 2021 (<https://www.akorda.kz/en/state-of-the-nation-address-by-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayev-38126>)

country's human rights image, including the abolition of the death penalty¹⁶. Additionally, he announced an increase in the minimum wage from \$100 to \$160, recognized the merits that digitalization has had on employment, and vouched that it too would receive "government assistance in terms of social and health insurance, pensions, and taxation"¹⁷.

While many underlying issues and instincts may have motivated Tokayev to conduct, or at the very least announce, some of the aforementioned reforms, no single event has had a greater effect on the Kazakh president than the January 2022 unrest. Coming as a result of mounting injustices, unequal distributions of wealth, and the unsatisfactory state of the rule of law, the protests on January 6th, 2022 were the ultimate test for the new leader of Kazakhstan. His initial reaction was to authorize the use of lethal force against those he called "terrorists and bandits"¹⁸. Despite Tokayev's impulse to blame what happened on "foreign-trained" terrorist groups¹⁹, the investigative action in the days that followed the stabilization of the situation placed suspicion on some formerly prominent figures²⁰. Tokayev called for an intervention of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and with the assistance of the joint forces, the protests were quickly subdued. However necessary this knee-jerk pushback by Tokayev might have been, the Kazakh president appeared to have immediately understood the bigger problem behind the violent outburst.

Now with physical violence removed from the realm of immediate threat, Tokayev's next step was the recognition of a number of problems that plagued Kazakh society and the decision to tackle them head on. Right off the bat, he stressed the problem of income inequality, stating that "162 persons own a half of the country's wealth, whereas half of population has no income of more than 50,000 tenge"²¹. Tokayev understood that only an inclusive political system would eventually pave the way for an inclusive economic system. This prompted another state of the nation address on March 16th, 2022, during which he announced what to this date remains the most decisive turn to substantial reform. The address contained ten "initiatives", as the document refers to them, which laid out Tokayev's priorities for a "New Kazakhstan"²².

The first initiative pertains to the presidential powers. It contains the admission that the country has become stagnant and that too much revolves around the role of the president²³. More importantly, Tokayev announced a significant

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- 16 "Kazakhstan abolishes death penalty", DW, February 2, 2021 (<https://www.dw.com/en/kazakhstan-abolishes-death-penalty/a-56117176>)
- 17 "State of the Nation Address by President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev", Akorda.kz. Republic of Kazakhstan, September 1, 2021 (<https://www.akorda.kz/en/state-of-the-nation-address-by-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayev-38126>)
- 18 Shaun Walker, "Kazakhstan president vows to destroy 'bandits and terrorists' behind protests", *The Guardian*, January 7, 2022 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/07/kazakhstan-president-vows-to-destroy-bandits-and-terrorists-behind-protests>)
- 19 "Kazakhstan unrest: Troops ordered to fire without warning", BBC, January 7, 2022 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59907235>)
- 20 Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan: Key Nazarbayev cronies undergo apparent purge", Eurasianet, January 17, 2022 (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-key-nazarbayev-cronies-undergo-apparent-purge>)
- 21 "162 People Own Half of Kazakhstan's Wealth: President Tokayev", Business Media Georgia, January 21, 2022 (<https://bm.ge/en/article/162-people-own-half-of-kazakhstans-wealth-president-tokayev/100156>)
- 22 "State-of-the-Nation Address by President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev", Akorda.kz. Republic of Kazakhstan, March 16, 2022 (<https://www.akorda.kz/en/state-of-the-nation-address-by-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayev-17293>)
- 23 Ibid.

reduction in presidential powers and his intention to resign as the party chairman and deny all holders of public offices, even district and rural *akims*, to retain positions within the party. Moreover, the announcement featured the decision to abolish the presidential prerogative to remove *akims* in the event of disagreement. As part of other initiatives that dealt with political representation, the speech announced a pending reduction in the number of presidential deputies in the Senate from 15 to 10, as well as a reduced role for the Senate itself—now without the ability not to adopt the laws that have already been adopted by the Majilis.

A need for greater political participation stood out as one of the more pressing issues. The already lowered threshold of 20,000 people required to register a political party was now reduced to only 5,000, while the procedure itself was soon to be simplified. Just how many new parties will be registered due to these changes in procedures remains to be seen. While some predictions have indicated great success and the registration of an untold number of new political actors, nothing of the kind has happened in the months that followed²⁴. Nevertheless, the simplification of procedures has laid the groundwork for significant changes to start taking place. Perhaps in the first half of 2023, these amendments will be put to their most serious test yet, as Chairman of Kazakhstan’s Majilis Yerlan Koshanov announced that the country will hold parliamentary elections²⁵.

For a country as large as Kazakhstan, governing in a highly centralized manner generates a host of issues. Especially in modern times, this creates problems in implementing policies locally and equally distributing services within a reasonable timeframe. Oftentimes, centralized budgets translate into not having the ability to receive information fast enough about the most basic of local needs. In other words, it is a sure way to cement inequality of development. The reforms being implemented are ensuring that more than 2,000 regional and local communities in Kazakhstan begin to retain the taxes paid locally. But for economic decisions to be made locally, political representation must exist locally. From a completely proportional system that could be controlled centrally, Tokayev’s announced reforms signaled a shift towards a majoritarian electoral system, which is more personalized and provides voice to local communities. Still, this is envisioned only partially, as only 30 percent of the seats in the Majilis will be elected in accordance with a majoritarian model. The situation was slightly improved in regional parliaments, where 50 percent of seats will follow the stated model²⁶.

Societal needs are one thing, the mentality of elites quite another. For societies that emerged from the Soviet Union—a profoundly authoritarian system—it is quite unprecedented for leaders to reduce their own power deliberately. Yet, this happened with Tokayev. On April 29th, 2022, Kazakhstan’s

24 Joana Lillis, “Kazakhstan: Political reset or more old-style authoritarianism?”, Eurasianet, September 12, 2022 (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-political-reset-or-more-old-style-authoritarianism>)

25 Burc Eruygur, “Kazakh parliamentary elections to be held in 1st half of 2023: Majilis”, Anadolu Agency, November 23, 2022 (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/kazakh-parliamentary-elections-to-be-held-in-1st-half-of-2023-majilis/2746129>)

26 Albert Barro, Svante E. Cornell, *Social Reforms in Kazakhstan*, Silk Road Paper, September 2022 (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/220920-Kazakh.pdf>)

president revealed his intention to hold a nationwide referendum on constitutional reforms²⁷. Scheduled for June 5th, the referendum was the ultimate poll on increasingly *political* change in the Kazakh system and “the renewal of the state model”, which the authorities already referred to as the “Second Republic”²⁸.

With a turnout of 68 percent, citizens of Kazakhstan voted overwhelmingly in support of the suggested constitutional reforms, garnering 77.18 percent in favor of changes. While sporadic objections were made about the way in which the voting was conducted²⁹, the result of the referendum was clear and unquestionable. This was a definitive sign that whatever message was being delivered by the people on January 6th, was indeed received loud and clear by Tokayev. As the referendum’s results may suggest, his interpretation of what should be the response, was also well received.

Building on his reformist tempo, Tokayev had new surprises in store before the end of the summer. As soon as September 2022, he signed a decree in which he imposed further limits on presidential powers, obligating any future president to a single 7-year term in office. To avoid any lingering doubt of critics who openly debated whether the president would abuse the newly signed decree in the interest of extending his time in office, Kazakhstan’s top executive called for a snap election³⁰, which was held on November 20th. Securing another decisive win with 81.31 percent of the vote, according to the nation’s Central Election Commission, Tokayev relished the opportunity to present himself as a reformer. The move should prove that the new term in office would indeed be his last, if he is to stick to the letter of his own reforms.

27 “Kazakh leader proposes referendum on constitutional reform”, Reuters, April 29, 2022 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kazakh-leader-proposes-referendum-constitutional-reform-2022-04-29/>)

28 Erlan Karin, “On New Kazakhstan and Second Republic”, *Astana Times*, March 25, 2022 (<https://astanatimes.com/2022/03/on-new-kazakhstan-and-second-republic/>)

29 “Kazakhs Vote For Constitutional Changes Ending Nazarbaev’s Grip On Country”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 6, 2022 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-electoral-commission-referendum-vote/31885183.html>)

30 “Kazakh leader calls snap presidential election on 20 November”, Euractiv/Reuters, September 22, 2022 (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/kazakh-leader-calls-snap-presidential-election-on-20-november/>)

Uzbekistan

Sharing the same legacy as another country also means sharing many of the same challenges in shaping the future. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan started off their transitional phase on a similar footing. In fact, they quite often looked up to each other, searching for ways to resolve similar issues that burdened their systems. The role of the leader of the nation that Nursultan Nazarbayev played in Kazakhstan, was mirrored by his Uzbek counterpart Islam Karimov. Much like Nazarbayev, Karimov mobilized those sectors of the economy that provided competitive advantage to Uzbekistan on the international market. For many years, Uzbekistan relied on three major sources of revenue: energy exports, cotton, and remittances from its nationals abroad—mainly the Russian Federation³¹. According to internationally recorded data, Uzbek GDP peaked in 2015, a year before Karimov’s death³².

However, while they might have provided some stability in the turbulent days of the post-Soviet era, the Karimov years were characterized by political oppression, clashes with Islamists, scandals involving his own family³³, and constant threat of conflict with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan over terrorism and resources³⁴. Karimov’s authoritarian style included a relatively high degree of tolerance for blatant abuses of human dignity such as forced labor in the cotton fields³⁵ and harsh prison sentences for minor or fabricated offences³⁶. Besides nurturing economically damaging policies as the maintenance of exit visas for Uzbekistan’s citizens, Islam Karimov even infamously outlawed the teaching of (and even use of the term) political science in a 2015 decree, labeling it “pseudo-science”³⁷. While his death in 2016 encouraged those who wanted to break with his practices, it exposed the country to the dangers of power vacuum. Unsurprisingly, the years that followed—both in terms of new president Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s reforms and his determination to confront Karimov’s allies and family for mishandling national resources³⁸—gained international attention.

Mirziyoyev, just like Tokayev, had already served as his country’s prime minister for more than a decade, which only implies that he knew the system well and had a fairly good idea on how to reform it. Upon assuming presidential

31 “Uzbekistan: Karimov’s Successor Faces an Economic Mess”, Eurasianet, September 1, 2016 (<https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-karimovs-successor-faces-economic-mess>)

32 The World Bank, Uzbekistan GDP, (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=UZ>)

33 Joanna Lillis, “Uzbekistan: The Life and Legacy of Islam Karimov”, Eurasianet, September 2, 2016 (<https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-the-life-and-legacy-of-islam-karimov>)

34 Joanna Lillis, “Uzbekistan Leader Warns of Water Wars in Central Asia”, Eurasianet, September 7, 2012 (<https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-leader-warns-of-water-wars-in-central-asia>)

35 Hugh Williamson, “Uzbekistan Ends Systemic Forced Labor, Civil Society Says”, Human Rights Watch, March 11, 2022 (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/11/uzbekistan-ends-systemic-forced-labor-civil-society-says>)

36 Akzam Turgunov, “Where Are ‘New’ Uzbekistan’s Promised Reforms?”, *The Diplomat*, November 23, 2021 (<https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/where-are-new-uzbekistans-promised-reforms/>)

37 Alec Luhn, “Uzbek president bans teaching of political science”, *The Guardian*, September 5, 2015 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/05/uzbekistan-islam-karimov-bans-political-science>)

38 Mike Eckel, “Under New Uzbek Leadership, Even Predecessor’s Widow, Family Are In The Crosshairs”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 8, 2018 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/brides-of-ferghana-under-new-uzbek-leadership-even-predecessor-s-widow-family-are-in-the-crosshairs/29531301.html>)

duties, his high-profile international visits were used to promote Uzbekistan's new image, which included the 2017 declaration that the goal of his reforms was "[...]to build a democratic state and a just society"³⁹. Mirziyoyev's actions toward meeting that goal could be observed within the framework of three strategic documents outlining reformist plans: the "Action Strategy" that tackled the economic angle and issues with corruption; the "Concept of Administrative Reform" that dealt with government services; and the "Program on Legal and Judicial Reform", which was aimed at citizens' rights.

All the stated documents were enacted as presidential decrees, the first of which was the Program on Legal and Judicial Reform. An additional testimony to the fact that Mirziyoyev was fully prepared to succeed Karimov is that he signed the Program in 2016 as an acting president, merely a month after his predecessor's passing. For the first time, a document issued by Uzbek officials envisioned and encouraged an active role of civil society. While this role was officially meant to increase the accountability of government⁴⁰—as is usually the case in countries around the world—this was a useful way to ensure that the government ultimately controlled the NGO narrative while proceeding with institutional liberalization. Mirziyoyev also wanted to immediately demonstrate that his era as the nation's leader would be fundamentally different on the human rights front. For this reason, he has championed reform in areas where Uzbekistan had long lagged behind, including eventually the abolition of forced labor—an achievement that earned him global praise. Therefore, it is no surprise that his Program went as far as to suggest constitutional changes in the interest of meeting higher human rights standards.

Uzbekistan's president has in many ways laid the groundwork for the model that was later followed in Kazakhstan. One of the recognizable patterns is the pace of reforms, which were announced in packages and within a time period of every few months. Shortly after being elected president, Mirziyoyev went ahead with the announcement of the "Action Strategy on Five Priority Areas of the Country's Development for 2017-2021". As the document states, these included the "improvement of state and public construction; ensuring the rule of law and further reform of the judicial system; the development and liberalization of the economy; the development of the social sphere; and ensuring the security, inter-ethnic harmony and religious tolerance, the implementation of balanced, mutually beneficial and constructive foreign policy"⁴¹.

Each of the proclaimed priority areas set out ambitious goals. Whereas "*Improving the system of state and public construction*" envisioned a more pronounced role of the parliament in the improved system, as well as the development of the public service and improvement of "e-government", "*Ensuring the rule of law*

39 United Nations, "Address by H.E. Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the UNGA-72", September 19, 2017 (https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/fr/statements_speeches/address-he-mr-shavkat-mirziyoyev-president-republic-uzbekistan-unga-72)

40 Anthony C. Bowyer, *Political Reform in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan: Elections, Political Parties and Civil Society*, Silk Road Paper, March 2018 (<https://isdpeu/content/uploads/2018/03/Political-Reform-in-Mirziyoyev%E2%80%99s-Uzbekistan-A.-Bowyer.pdf>)

41 "On the Strategy for the Further Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan" – Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, uszm.uz, October 2, 2017 (https://uzsm.uz/en/press_center/uzb_news/on-the-strategy-for-the-further-development-of-the-republic-of-uzbekistan/)

and further reform of the judicial system” stressed the need to bolster the independence of courts and prevent extrajudicial detainment and imprisonment on political grounds⁴². In the “*Liberalization of the economy*” area, the document announced “the gradual introduction of modern market of currency regulation mechanisms, expansion of the revenue base of local budgets, and the expansion of foreign economic relations”⁴³, among other things. Just as importantly, it recognized the overpronounced role of the state in the economy and the need for its step-by-step withdrawal from different corners of socio-economic life.

In the section devoted to the “*Development of the social sphere*”, Mirziyoyev’s concept centers on efforts to bring up the general standard of living. While this is about “the provision of services to citizens”⁴⁴, it is also about job security, improvement in the populations purchasing power etc. Moreover, this is equally about preventing brain drain, which the president acknowledged as a creeping problem among young Uzbeks—as they will be increasingly drawn to tempting opportunities abroad due to a lack of domestic prospects. Finally, “*Ensuring the security, inter-ethnic harmony and religious tolerance, the implementation of balanced, mutually beneficial and constructive foreign policy*” as the name suggests, is a dominantly outward-looking part of the Strategy. As a step in a different direction from that of the Karimov era, Uzbekistan entered the Mirziyoyev presidency with a more conciliatory tone towards the Central Asian region. This section stressed the necessity of a regional security effort, as well as a need for the country to “join the ranks of developed democratic states”⁴⁵.

One year after Karimov’s death, Mirziyoyev introduced another reformist package in the form of a decree, entitled “On the approval of the concept of administrative reform in the Republic of Uzbekistan”⁴⁶. As was the case with the other strategic documents that signaled substantial reform, the Concept emphasized inclusion and transparency. From these practices it became evident that Mirziyoyev was aiming to ease the work of civil society in Uzbekistan, or at the very least “get on their good side”. After all, a lot of what independent rule of law monitors and human rights watchers conclude ends up significantly impacting a country’s economic and investment climate. No reduction of taxes or administrative reshuffling can ultimately compensate for poor scores on the corruption index, nor can it hide suboptimal capacities to protect private property. To this end, the Uzbek president’s aim for the Concept was to enable wide-ranging public assessment of what the administration was doing, and especially for the professional public to keep the state apparatus in check.

At the time of this writing in 2022, most of the stated goals in Uzbekistan’s strategic documents have already been met. Mirziyoyev has successfully secured another term by winning the October 2021 presidential election

42 Ibid

43 Ibid

44 Ibid

45 Anthony C. Bowyer, *Political Reform in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan: Elections, Political Parties and Civil Society*, Silk Road Paper, March 2018 (<https://isdpeu/content/uploads/2018/03/Political-Reform-in-Mirziyoyev%E2%80%99s-Uzbekistan-A.-Bowyer.pdf>)

46 “About approval of the Concept of administrative reform in the Republic of Uzbekistan” – Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, cis-legislation.com, September 8, 2017 (<https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=100940>)

with 80.1 percent of the vote⁴⁷. Fast forward to more recent events, the country launched a new initiative in February 2022, building on the success of the old ones. The “New Uzbekistan 2022-2026”, as this development agenda is referred to, appears multifaceted and strives to achieve a plethora of goals. First of all, it continues the Mirziyoyev-established tradition of public consultation in addressing societal needs⁴⁸. Further, it endeavors to diversify the structure of the economy, dedicating special incentives for small and medium-sized enterprises and the agriculture sector⁴⁹. Its new goal is to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with “states with an upper-middle income”, reaching GDP per capita of \$4,000⁵⁰. Its direct achievements will be ones of development, but its meaning for the nation, coupled with other transformative efforts, could be those of enlightenment.

To what extent Mirziyoyev will succeed in implementing overarching reforms will depend on a multiplicity of factors. One is whether there will be more political reform or will most things remain in the domain of investment and economics. Political reform will ultimately come down to how Mirziyoyev truly feels about democratization. Equally important for him will be to persevere in the face of strong resistance from those who will inevitably emerge as losers of this transition, as backsliding on what has been achieved might have far-reaching consequences—certainly for Uzbekistan but for the entire region as well.

47 Bahtiyar Abdülkerimov, “Uzbek president wins 2nd term in landslide victory”, Anadolu Agency, October 25, 2021 (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/uzbek-president-wins-2nd-term-in-landslide-victory/2402415>)

48 Mehmet Seyefettin Erol, “Main Targets of Uzbekistan’s 2022-2026 Development Strategy”, Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Studies, February 22, 2022 (https://www.ankasam.org/main-targets-of-uzbekistans-2022-2026-development-strategy/?lang=en#_edn1)

49 Ibid

50 “Uzbekistan’s road map for future investors”, Euronews, September 9, 2022 (<https://www.euronews.com/2022/09/09/uzbekistans-road-map-for-future-investors>)

Geopolitical Considerations

One important issue for the prospect of successful reform and development is geopolitics, and for Central Asian states, geopolitical calculus has practically been part of their daily considerations since independence. Positioned between powerful neighbors whose actions crucially affect the security, political, and economic landscapes of the region, Central Asian countries have perfected the art of balancing and maneuvering in foreign policy. On its northern frontier, the region borders Russia, with which it used to form the Soviet Union and continues many cultural and linguistic ties—omnipresent since the days of incorporation into the Russian Empire. To the east, the region is faced by China, another great power whose ethnic diversity links up Central Asian peoples and the Chinese state in a way that has significant geopolitical implications. To the south lies another former empire, now in the form of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which too has ethno-linguistic ties with Tajikistan and explores other avenues to project influence. Last but certainly not least, Central Asia shares borders with Afghanistan. A breeding ground for radicalism and a vital transit corridor for landlocked Central Asia, decades of instability in Afghanistan have caused concern in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan whose dominant ethnic groups inhabit Afghanistan in large numbers. Whether these groups are radicalized or mistreated, it is easy to see both becoming problems for Central Asian states.

However diverse and multidirectional geopolitical influence in the region becomes, the most obvious contenders for influence are Russia and China. Kazakhstan is the only country of the region that borders both. In fact, with its own vast territory, it is the only country that borders Russia. For better or worse, this makes it the most exposed to Russia's activity—be it diplomatic, economic, or, as recent events have demonstrated, military. One could argue that Kazakhstan's geographic realities are directly translated into its economic integration policies. While the Central Asian state maintains active cooperation with its neighbors in the region, it is deeply integrated into Russia-led economic and security projects. Kazakhstan has been a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) since its inception in 2015 and part of the CSTO, an intergovernmental military alliance.

The January 2022 protests that initially broke out in Kazakhstan's city of Zhanaozen over the price of liquified petroleum gas⁵¹ quickly spread throughout the country. As we now know, they were not so much about any specific event, but rather a symptom of accumulated dissatisfaction with the country's direction. Eager to put an end to the protests, president Tokayev soon called for a CSTO intervention to counter a "terrorist threat"⁵². After the CSTO force tamed the unrest, it began to pull out of the country in a matter

51 Almaz Kumenov, Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan explainer: Why did fuel prices spike, bringing protesters out onto the streets?", Eurasianet, January 4, 2022 (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-explainer-why-did-fuel-prices-spike-bringing-protesters-out-onto-the-streets>)

52 "Kazakhstan's president requests CSTO assistance in overcoming terrorist threat", Tass, January 5, 2022 (<https://tass.com/world/1384229>)

of days, completing its withdrawal on January 19th, 2022⁵³. What immediately sparked discussion was not the efficiency with which the intervention was carried out but how much leverage this would provide Russia over president Tokayev and the Kazakh leadership⁵⁴.

Since the January unrest, however, a host of international developments have changed the world beyond recognition. Moscow's military involvement in Ukraine since February 24th, 2022, has unleashed an unprecedented level of fury in the West, which has been collectively imposing harsh economic sanctions on Russia. Businesses, media, and other enterprises with ties to the Russian Federation have been closed throughout Europe and North America, and the number of sanctions enforced against Russia surpass that of any other state on Earth⁵⁵. Western brands continue to withdraw from the Russian market, and some EU member states now deny entry to Russian citizens⁵⁶. With its military almost entirely committed to the tasks in Ukraine, Russia can hardly afford to think about security in other theaters of interest. Needless to say, Central Asia is no exception.

All things considered, it is safe to say that the balance of power has shifted. Whatever debt Kazakhstan owed Russia has now all but evaporated. One fact is fairly simple: Russia needs Kazakh assistance if it is to avoid total isolation. Due to sanctions, major westward trade routes in Russia have become less viable and the only alternative land-based direction for Russian goods to reach the outside world is either through the Caucasus or Central Asia. While it cannot compensate for the volumes that traversed Russian routes before February, Kazakhstan and Central Asia are making use of the promising Middle Corridor, which equally sparks interest of their European partners seeking to diversify their energy supply⁵⁷. As a route that connects China with the Caspian Sea by circumventing Russian economic lifelines, the Middle Corridor has long been an object of Moscow's criticism. Yet, in 2022 and the coming years, the timing cannot be better—both for Central Asia to capitalize on this route and for Russia to get on board with everyone using it⁵⁸.

Central Asian governments are aware that large reforms require uninterrupted financing and massive sacrifices when it comes to spending. This, however, is the worst time to be exposed to wide-ranging economic shocks, and some international attempts to isolate Russia are not helping. With the prices of energy, grain, and fertilizers rising due to the reduced accessibility of the Ukrainian and Russian markets, prices of food have been steadily increasing throughout

53 Assel Satubaldina, "CSTO Peacekeepers Complete Their Mission, Withdraw from Kazakhstan", *Astana Times*, January 20, 2022 (<https://astanatimes.com/2022/01/csto-peacekeepers-complete-their-mission-withdraw-from-kazakhstan/>)

54 Aigerim Toleukhanova, "After the protests, what debt will Kazakhstan's leaders owe Russia?", *Euractiv*, January 18, 2022 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/opinion/after-the-protests-what-debt-will-kazakhstans-leaders-owe-russia/>

55 Statista Research Department (November 3, 2022) Number of international sanctions imposed worldwide as of October 28, 2022, by target country <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1294726/number-of-global-sanctions-by-target-country/>

56 "Poland, Baltics Impose Entry Bans On Most Russians With EU Visas", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 19, 2022 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/poland-baltics-entry-ban-russians-eu-visas/32040504.html>)

57 James Jay Carafano, "Central Asia's Middle Corridor gains traction at Russia's expense", *GIS*, August 29, 2022 (<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/middle-corridor/>)

58 Faridun Sattarov, "The Emerging Potential of the Middle Corridor", *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, 21, Summer 2022 (<https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-summer-2022-issue-no.21/the-emerging-potential-of-the-middle-corridor>)

Central Asia⁵⁹. In dealing with the Russian market, Central Asian businesses are now also forced to take precautionary steps to avoid secondary sanctions. Despite best efforts, not everyone has been successful in evading Western scrutiny⁶⁰.

Another issue is that all Central Asian states have taken in waves after waves of Russian migrants since February 2022. Some of those migrants left Russia immediately, fearing disconnection from their globally integrated jobs. Others found themselves unable to earn a living and departed when Russia was disconnected from the Swift system⁶¹. Of course, many fled when Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the beginning of a “partial mobilization” on September 21st⁶². The immediate and obvious impact of this many Russians arriving in Central Asia were the rising prices of rent across major cities⁶³. Over the long-term, this will only add to the already significant number of ethnic Russians living around all Central Asian states—slightly over 3.4 million in Kazakhstan alone⁶⁴. Should they choose to stay permanently, this will impact every aspect of life for their host countries, from political participation and macroeconomics to daily events in local constituencies. While this might drive economic growth⁶⁵, it will also contribute to solidifying ties with Moscow—not necessarily the principal goal of Central Asian states.

As former Soviet republics, all countries of Central Asia have family ties with Russia in one way or another. Since the ascent of Vladimir Putin to power and days of promising growth of the mid-2000s, waves of Central Asians have sought employment in Russia. For the economies back home, this meant billions of dollars in remittances—something that came into question once they faced the prospect of Russia’s faltering economy. But counterintuitively, this was not at all the effect recorded in 2022. For instance, Uzbekistan’s data suggests a growth in remittances of 96 percent in the first half of 2022 relative to the same period in 2021⁶⁶. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan’s records on remittances show an 11 percent increase in comparison to those of last year⁶⁷. Finally, one lucky circumstance for all of the region’s economies is their hydrocarbon power. With energy prices being what they are, Central Asia has been generating revenue almost effortlessly. In summation, while feeling some of the negative impacts of geopolitical turbulence, the region’s economies have shown themselves to be relatively resilient⁶⁸. At this moment in time, much of this is still circumstantial. There is little doubt, nonetheless, that substantial reform throughout Central Asia will only help strengthen the region’s economic resilience.

59 Yunis Sharifli, Chia-Lin Kao, Bermet Derbishova “Russia’s War in Ukraine and Its Impact on Central Asia”, *The Diplomat*, October 24, 2022 (<https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/russias-war-in-ukraine-and-its-impact-on-central-asia/>)

60 Joanna Lillis, “U.S. slaps secondary sanctions on Uzbekistan firm”, Eurasianet, June 29, 2022 (<https://eurasianet.org/us-slaps-secondary-sanctions-on-uzbekistan-firm>)

61 Russel Hotten, “Ukraine conflict: What is Swift and why is banning Russia so significant?”, BBC News, May 4, 2022 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60521822>)

62 “Executive Order on partial mobilisation in the Russian Federation”, Kremlin.ru, September 21, 2022 (<http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/69391>)

63 Yunis Sharifli, Chia-Lin Kao, Bermet Derbishova “Russia’s War in Ukraine and Its Impact on Central Asia”, *The Diplomat*, October 24, 2022 (<https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/russias-war-in-ukraine-and-its-impact-on-central-asia/>)

64 Results of the National Census population 2021 in the Republic of Kazakhstan (*Итоги Национальной переписи населения 2021 года в Республике Казахстан*), stat.gov.kz (<https://stat.gov.kz/api/getFile/?docId=ESTAT464825>)

65 Anton Usov, “Central Asia shows strong resilience to geopolitical turmoil”, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, September 28, 2022 (<https://www.ebrd.com/news/2022/central-asia-shows-great-resilience-to-geopolitical-turmoil-.html>)

66 Ibid

67 Ibid

68 Ibid

On the political front, most Central Asian states direct their efforts at maintaining the balancing act. Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan refer to this strategy as “multivectorism”⁶⁹. The region’s countries are pursuing friendly relations with all major geopolitical stakeholders, which first and foremost pertains to Russia and China, but allow space for “outside powers” to play a mutually beneficial role too. The events of 2022 have demonstrated just how crucial the Central Asian region can be for the West as well, which prompted European officials to assume a more proactive posture. The EU’s High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borell visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in November 2022, taking part in the EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference in Samarkand, and exploring the possibilities for new investments. This could possibly lead to the involvement of Central Asian states in the EU’s “Global Gateway” connectivity strategy⁷⁰—a prospective giant among infrastructure projects.

Whether one can attribute Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan’s balanced policies to “Turkic wisdom” is up for debate. One thing is certain though: both have maintained principled positions and advanced relations with all parties to the conflict in Ukraine. Moreover, they did so without engaging in finger-pointing or explicitly siding with any one actor. Where there was concern, they either voiced it wisely or provided signs that they did not approve of their partner’s actions without making specific references. Most famously, sitting on the stage of St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022, Kazakhstan’s President Tokayev said that his country recognizes “neither Taiwan, nor Kosovo, nor South Ossetia and Abkhazia” and that “in all likelihood, this principle will be applied to quasi-state entities, which in our opinion are Luhansk and Donetsk”⁷¹. While this could have passed as principled or even routine on some other occasion, one might want to add that this was Tokayev’s statement while sitting next to Russian president Vladimir Putin. At the same time, Central Asian states emphasize their determination to “pursue [...] constructive foreign policy” centered on “[...] mutually beneficial cooperation and strategic partnership with neighboring states [...]”⁷², clearly referencing both Russia and China.

The great powers of Central Asia’s neighborhood officially take no issue with any policy that strives for “mutual benefit”. This brings us to the “democracy vs. autocracy” argument, which while an oversimplification of reality, deserves at least some consideration. Since the reforms being undertaken in Central Asia could qualify as genuine democratization processes, the argument goes, both China and Russia should see them as threats to their respective systems. Following this logic, areas for cooperation between such ideologically diverging systems would shrink rapidly, allowing space only for growing mistrust and conflict. In reality

69 Zhanibek Arynov, “Is Kazakhstan’s Multi-Vector Foreign Policy Threatened”, *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, 21, Summer 2022 (<https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-summer-2022-issue-no.21/is-kazakhstans-multi-vector-foreign-policy-threatened>)

70 “Josep Borrell: Kazakhstan is EU’s biggest trade partner in Central Asia”, Kazinform, November 17, 2022 (https://www.inform.kz/en/josep-borrell-kazakhstan-is-eu-s-biggest-trade-partner-in-central-asia_a4002593)

71 Assel Satubaldina, “President Tokayev Answers Tough Questions at Economic Forum in Russia”, *Astana Times*, June 18, 2022 (<https://astanatimes.com/2022/06/president-tokayev-answers-tough-questions-at-economic-forum-in-russia/>)

72 “Kazakhstan to focus on relations with Russia, China in foreign policy — Tokayev”, TASS, November 26, 2022 (<https://tass.com/world/1542199>)

though, this may not necessarily be the case. While China and Russia may not meet Western standards of what constitutes a democracy, their history of cooperation with different systems of government suggests that ideological orientation and domestic decision-making preferences of other states are normally not prioritized.

There is no better testament to this than China's Belt and Road Initiative, a signature infrastructure project that brings together different continents, each of which contains a variety of modalities on how to run a society. Furthermore, Beijing's 16+1 format with Central and Eastern European democracies, which has gone through a variety of transformations since its founding in 2012, sheds light on where Chinese priorities truly lie: strategic infrastructure and trade arrangements that benefit both China and their host countries. Similarly, prior to the sharp deterioration of relations with the EU over Ukraine, Russia's close cooperation with thriving democracies like Italy and Austria suggested these were pragmatic, interest-driven relations that took precedence over any ideological considerations⁷³. If these examples are not convincing enough due to their geographic distance, the 2020 presidential election in Belarus provides a telling case. There is more than enough evidence that Moscow was perfectly willing to allow Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko to lose power, as long as an incoming alternative did not assume a strategic anti-Russian course⁷⁴. In fact, the Kremlin had long calculated what to do and only opted to prop up Lukashenko when it became clear that his continued rule would also mean a total pacification of Belarus relative to Russia⁷⁵. In other words, while it might be tempting to think that powers like Russia and China could not tolerate a different form of government on their borders, practice demonstrates that these are at best secondary concerns—always taking a backseat to strategic, security, and interest-based considerations.

None of this means that such powers will not compete for influence. They will and they are. When they do, this is likely to manifest itself through investments and capital projects⁷⁶ that tend to resonate both with the leadership of the host country—which has a vested interest in facilitating projects—and their electorates who will enjoy some of the resulting benefits. It is notable that Kazakhstan received \$33 billion in Chinese investments by early 2022⁷⁷, while the whole region's data suggested a figure of \$40 billion back in 2020⁷⁸—an amount that has only grown since. Extensive trade ties are characteristic of the region's relations with Russia. However, Russian investment falls short of Chinese financial efforts, having reached \$12 billion in Kazakhstan in 2016⁷⁹,

73 "Austria Is Betting on Russia Where Austrian Officers Get Top Jobs", Warsaw Institute, June 9, 2021 (<https://warsawinstitute.org/austria-betting-russia-austrian-officers-get-top-jobs/>)

74 Dmitri Trenin, "Game Over for Lukashenko: the Kremlin's Next Move", Carnegie Moscow Center, August 17, 2020 (<https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/82493>)

75 Oleg Chupryna, "Lukashenko, Putin and the protests: Why Belarus is being pulled further into Russia's orbit", LSE Blogs, December 2, 2020 (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/12/02/lukashenko-putin-and-the-protests-why-belarus-is-being-pulled-further-into-russias-orbit/>)

76 "Uzbekistan signs large deals with China, Russia", Reuters, September 16, 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/uzbekistan-signs-large-deals-with-china-russia-2022-09-16/>

77 Asim Kashgarian, "China's Financial Diplomacy Wins Influence in Central Asian Countries", Voice of America, January 27, 2022 (<https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-financial-diplomacy-wins-influence-in-central-asian-countries/6416255.html>)

78 Azimzhan Khitakhunov, "Economic Cooperation between Central Asia and China", Eurasian Research, February 18, 2022 (<https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/economic-cooperation-between-central-asia-and-china/>)

79 Jon Yuan Jiang, "Central Asian elites choose China over Russia", East Asia Forum, November 25, 2021 (<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/11/25/central-asian-elites-choose-china-over-russia/>)

and \$5.9 in Uzbekistan by the end of 2020⁸⁰. Russia's difficult position due to economic sanctions, large-scale military spending, brain drain, and diplomatic setbacks, only means that its traditional role in Central Asia will increasingly be assumed by China. In an era in which Russia requires Chinese support even to maintain the functioning of some of its industries, Moscow might be prepared to accept a more junior role in Central Asia. To help cement this hierarchy in the region's geopolitical environment, China's President Xi Jinping paid his first foreign visit since the long pandemic break to Kazakhstan, where he vowed "to strongly support Kazakhstan in defending its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity [...] and oppose the interference of any forces in the internal affairs of your country"⁸¹—a clear message to the Russian leadership.

Meanwhile, the EU does not have such formidable tools of power projection in the region. As a bloc that does care about rights, values, and forms of government—at least to some extent—it takes great comfort in the fact that Central Asia is going through extensive political reforms. This only bolsters practical European goals, which include free flowing energy, traversable transit corridors, and reliable infrastructure. The EU prides itself on being the largest direct investor in Central Asia⁸², while trying to channel this financial clout as a means to pry off Asian nations from the dominant appeal of the Belt and Road Initiative. Values-based as European diplomacy may claim to be, it often shows that it too is not immune to geopolitical games and interest-driven objectives.

There are many reasons why reforms are being implemented in Central Asia at this time. Some of them include the ability of the region's states to increase their influence internationally and promote the positive image of Central Asia. Their experience of living among great powers and former empires might often require one to walk a tight rope. Above all else, it teaches one how to perfect the art of compromise, play with the heavyweights, and still end up as a winner. What is happening in Central Asia at the moment represents a wide and colorful palette of opportunities for everyone. As it turns out, this has so far generated very few threats and instead created space for many geopolitical actors to draw benefits of their own choosing.

80 "Trade turnover between Russia and Uzbekistan is planned to increase to US\$10 billion", Investment Promotion Agency Under the Ministry of Investments and Foreign Trade of the Republic of Uzbekistan, invest.gov.uz (<https://invest.gov.uz/mediacenter/news/trade-turnover-between-russia-and-uzbekistan-is-planned-to-increase-to-us-10-billion/>)

81 Assel Atubaldina, China's President Xi Jinping Pays State Visit to Kazakhstan, Confirming Excellent Relations Between Neighbouring Countries, *Astana Times*, September 14, 2022 (<https://astanatimes.com/2022/09/chinas-president-xi-jinping-pays-state-visit-to-kazakhstan-confirming-excellent-relations-between-neighbouring-countries/>)

82 Alexandra Brzozowski, "In Samarkand, EU vies to keep Central Asia close as region walks tightrope between Russia and China", Euractiv, November 18, 2022 (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/in-samarkand-eu-vies-to-keep-central-asia-close-as-region-walks-tightrope-between-russia-and-china/>)

Room for Improvement

The reforms conducted in Central Asia demonstrate that much can be achieved when there is political will coming from the top. The economies in question have grown, new investment has poured into Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and foreign powers have all found it necessary not only to be part of it, but to try and preserve this newfound environment of growth. Many past practices have been scrapped, with societies becoming more inclusive. Any side effects notwithstanding, this is a win-win scenario for presidents Tokayev and Mirziyoyev as architects of the aforementioned reforms. Not all major drawbacks have been properly addressed though. Deep-seated tendencies of bureaucrats loyal to the system may still undermine future progress in countries that continue to grapple with the legacy of the Soviet apparatus. These dangers lie in procedures and structures, but also in human character, which could prove much tougher to reform, even as Central Asian leaders continue to prepare new packages on innovation and governance.

After the events in early January 2022, President Tokayev swiftly removed the Chairman of the National Security Committee Karim Massimov, who was immediately detained and accused of treason⁸³. Former president Nazarbayev was stripped of his powers, which was later solidified as part of the constitutional changes that removed Nazarbayev's Leader of the Nation title (Elbasy). Since the Kazakh authorities launched the investigation, the Ministry of Interior has said that it conducted "about 45,000 investigative actions", eventually convicting "579 people of whom 462 received non-incarceration sentences"⁸⁴.

The unrest provided the leadership of Kazakhstan with two lessons. One is that the dissatisfaction was widespread and deeper than the event that sparked it. The other was that change was needed urgently. To act upon these lessons, president Tokayev needed to both initiate a reform process and urgently restore legitimacy. Therefore, it is entirely possible that the Kazakh leadership could not catch up with what was being discovered in the investigation in this time of urgency. As a result, the lack of reform of the security apparatus remained strikingly absent from any of the measures that Tokayev subsequently announced. Such an abject failure of the security services could have wide-ranging consequences for the country's future security landscape. Escaping the fragile state in which sporadic events can spark national instability thus demands foresight that is sorely lacking in the existing security structure in Kazakhstan. Old-school purges will just not do.

It is certainly commendable that the public space in Kazakhstan has taken a turn for greater pluralism and popular representation. Most of what is contained in Tokayev's addresses since March is a reflection of the concerns voiced by people who have no previous history of political activism or involvement in political parties. This also means that the government has been upping the ante when it comes to improving

83 Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan: Key Nazarbayev cronies undergo apparent purge", Eurasianet, January 17, 2022 (<https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-key-nazarbayev-cronies-undergo-apparent-purge>)

84 "Kazakh Internal Affairs Authorities Finish Pre-Trial Investigation into January Events", *Astana Times*, November 8, 2022 (<https://astanatimes.com/2022/11/kazakh-internal-affairs-authorities-finish-pre-trial-investigation-into-january-events/>)

public surveys and innovating the methods of listening to its population. Still, when the constitution was adopted, there was barely any public discussion and the time the nation was given to prepare for the referendum was insufficient for such an important decision. Announced on May 5th⁸⁵, the referendum took place exactly a month later. These decisions were all announced by the president, whose decrees are often the only method by which change is being made. Broader public debate and more time for experts, activists, and members of civil society to exchange views on important matters for the future of the country would thus make a desirable addition to the existing practices. Kazakhstan has already embarked on a path of more inclusion and is doing reasonably well. The country would do even better to double down on its initiatives.

More power to the Majilis relative to the president is a step in the right direction. So is the increase in the prerogatives of local *akims*. Having a decentralized system is an absolute precondition of most modern societies, for it provides for adequate local representation and real-time problem solving in remote communities. Yet, with only 30 percent of representatives being elected in a personalized majoritarian system, prospects of decentralization are being denied to the bigger portion of society. Instead, a majority of votes continue to be cast in favor of closed party lists, where candidates for the parliament are not necessarily representative of different corners of Kazakhstan. With the proportional and majoritarian systems being employed more evenly in the regional parliaments, they appear more closely in tune with the people's will. Lifting these practices to the national level would make sense in the context of the liberalization of the political system.

By excluding the possibility of a second presidential term, Tokayev seems to have ushered in a new era in Kazakhstani politics. Indeed, in accordance with the omnipresent willingness of him and his associates to listen to the pulse of the people, this is a rather popular move. The first concern this raises is that it will only be temporary. In other words, the Constitution may be amended again if the circumstances are right, and the incumbent shows enough ambition. The second concern is that even if the Constitution remains intact, elections might only lead to a string of planned successions. Throughout his career, Tokayev was Nazarbayev's prime minister, foreign minister, and chairman of the Senate before being promoted to acting president. He enjoyed all the attention of the public and was a familiar face to millions of voters. Should there be no change in how prospective candidates are publicly represented, one can only expect that the next president will be a prominent figure of the Tokayev administration—one with all the resources and support of the mainstream media.

This brings us to the final important point on Kazakhstan's room for improvement, at least when it comes to the existing reformist wave. None of the reforms include major changes in the media sector. Presently, state-owned media make up the larger portion of the scene in Kazakhstan⁸⁶. The alternative is mostly private media, which, while in the minority at the moment, will only grow in the time ahead.

85 "President Tokayev announces a referendum on June 5 on the adoption of amendments to the Constitution", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, May 5, 2022 (<https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/367672?lang=en>)

86 "Kazakhstan profile – Media", BBC News, October 18, 2022 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15482614>)

If there is to be more pluralism in Kazakhstan, this will have to come through a diversification of media outlets and the information they send out. When operated by a host of independent actors, an emerging media scene in Kazakhstan would almost certainly give birth to a new band of political parties that could at some point become a real force in the country's political life. What Kazakhstan can do is further relax the legal constraints that currently bind media operators. For the sake of remaining realistic, of all the fields where Kazakhstan has progressed immensely, the domain of the media is where the progress promises to be most moderate.

In Central Asia's most populous state of Uzbekistan, issues with Mirziyoyev's reforms appear in a similar pattern. After all, this report demonstrates that the two countries' practices have frequently served as blueprints for each other. Uzbekistan achieved stunning success in the early days of reform by abolishing abusive methods of the late president Karimov. It attracted the levels of investment and capital unimaginable throughout its entire history. Just like its northern neighbor, Uzbekistan fostered inclusion, making unprecedented breakthroughs in involving civil society in all issues of public interest. It loosened up on the tight laws that made it excruciatingly difficult for NGOs to even register. But then, the promising momentum stalled.

While able to oversee the work of the NGO sector by stirring the direction of the national narrative it controls anyway, the Uzbek government went a step further. On June 16th, 2022, the Uzbek authorities imposed a new piece of regulation on foreign funded NGOs, requiring them to cooperate with government employees, now known as "national partners"⁸⁷. In reality, national partners are project managers provided to the NGOs as both liaisons and monitoring officers. Needless to say, this stymies the planning and work of ostensibly independent civil society representatives but does not end there. It is further complicated by the system of reporting, which requires the NGOs to file the exact figures they receive in foreign funding to the Ministry of Justice, which then waits for the "opinion of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs"⁸⁸. The newly established policy is obviously meant to strengthen control over the very sector it once liberalized, which helped the Uzbek government pick up points with investors and international human rights champions. Now that their work has been made considerably harder, this may eventually result in the shrinking of the non-profit sector. Although the government's motive may have been to gain better oversight, it is at risk of losing the partner it worked hard to create.

Having delivered a range of examples on how to handle political transition and reforms to neighboring Kazakhstan, Mirziyoyev then followed the lead of Astana on the constitutional referendum. Just weeks after the June referendum in Kazakhstan, Mirziyoyev announced the intention to organize one in Uzbekistan⁸⁹. Although some of the suggestions in his announcement indicated the will to elevate human rights to another level—based on more egalitarian principles—the

87 Umida Niyazova and Lynn Schweisfurth, "New Regulations in Uzbekistan Effectively Impose Government Control on NGOs," *The Diplomat*, August 26, 2022 (<https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/new-regulations-in-uzbekistan-effectively-impose-government-control-on-ngos/>)

88 Ibid

89 "Uzbekistan: Constitutional reforms open way for Mirziyoyev to retain power," Eurasianet, Jun 21, 2022 (<https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-constitutional-reforms-open-way-for-mirziyoyev-to-retain-power>)

main point of the referendum lied in two crucial alterations. None inspired much hope. First, Mirziyoyev opened a path for himself to serve the third term as president. Now serving for the second time, the Uzbek president would be required to step down from his duties in 2026. As it turns out, his desired constitutional amendments would relieve him from such an obligation, making him eligible for another two terms in office⁹⁰. The second consequential amendment had to do with the status of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, an autonomous region within Uzbekistan. Should Mirziyoyev's changes end up as part of a new Constitution, Karakalpakstan would both be stripped of its present level of autonomy and barred from the ability to gain independence if it ever chose to do so in a referendum⁹¹.

News about Karakalpakstan spread fast, causing outrage of Karakalpaks and massive protests that resulted in the death of at least 21 people⁹². Mirziyoyev quickly withdrew his amendments in an attempt to calm tensions⁹³ but faced risks of continued ethnic clashes in the autonomous region. As opposed to regretting the miscalculations on constitutional change, the government continued with accusations against the protesters. Both suggested amendments serve as proof that efforts at liberalization and decentralization are at the very least not proceeding equally across the country. Regardless of how hopeful the prospects of democratization seemed in 2017, Mirziyoyev now looks eager to extend his reign. Whether this tendency will prove more important than his reformist impulses is yet unclear. But as far as criticism goes, nothing deserves it more than the Uzbek president's failed attempts at constitutional abuse.

90 Ibid

91 "Uzbek Constitutional Amendments To Change Status Of Karakalpakstan", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 27, 2022 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-karakalpakstan-no-right-secede/31918310.html>)

92 Press release, "Uzbekistan: Police Abuses in Autonomous Region Protests", Human Rights Watch/ Reliefweb, November 7, 2022 (<https://reliefweb.int/report/uzbekistan/uzbekistan-police-abuses-autonomous-region-protests-enru>)

93 "Uzbekistan president backtracks on constitution to defuse Karakalpakstan tension", Eurasianet, July 2, 2022 (<https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-president-backtracks-on-constitution-to-defuse-karakalpakstan-tension>)

Conclusion

As discussed in preceding sections of this report, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are countries with extensive Soviet legacy in the administrative, political, and economic contexts. The first years of their independence brought about an array of economic opportunities on the international market, from which their leaders were able to benefit due to abundant natural resources. As leaders, Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev and Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov were in many ways the embodiments of continuity with the overly bureaucratic and state-controlled economies they inherited, setting an expiration date for their countries' growth.

The fact that there are more than a few similarities between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan has served both states well. Policies of one helped guide the other. This made it easier to know what reforms were needed and where. It also made calculations on the timing of reforms more efficient. Finally, forecasting adverse effects over the long run became much more straightforward. The death of Islam Karimov in 2016 took Uzbekistan by surprise, which could have had implications for its succession plan. Kazakhstan, by contrast, had made preparations that went beyond the purely constitutional succession framework, allowing an orderly transition in 2019. Under the leadership of its new president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kazakhstan has found it necessary to announce new reforms fairly regularly and frequently. These included various measures aimed at increasing political participation and making the system more accessible to the population. As head of state, Tokayev presided over the pandemic recovery effort, increased the minimum wage, and opened the door for freedom of protest. Important as these early days of presidency are, nothing has more profoundly affected Tokayev than the January 2022 unrest.

The unrest in the first days of 2022 encouraged the Kazakh president to cleanse the state apparatus of Nazarbayev's cronies and announce a series of political reforms that are actively pushing the country toward democratization. Kazakhstan has since moved away from the super-presidential system and towards a more representative model that includes substantive roles for national and regional parliaments. These constitutional changes were certified in the June 5th, 2022 referendum. There are quotas for women and the electoral system has become more personalized, although one must note that there is still room to improve on the existing policies. Most notably, Tokayev signed a decree limiting the service of any future president to one 7-year term in office, which now that he has been re-elected in a snap election applies to him as well.

Uzbekistan's development pattern since the first term of its sitting president Shavkat Mirziyoyev has been somewhat similar. Signing a number of decrees, Mirziyoyev was initially focused on removing all barriers to economic development, including the country's infamous exit-visa policy. The reforms he put in place represented an administrative overhaul and a major breakthrough in the field of human rights. On top of those reforms, Mirziyoyev went big on enabling investment to flow into the country. His signature reforms can be summed up within the framework of the "Action Strategy", the "Concept

of Administrative Reform”, and the “Program on Legal and Judicial Reform”. Each of these programs effectively approached corruption-related issues, administrative difficulties that were specifically painful, and strived to improve the human rights record. Mirziyoyev earned both domestic and international points by ending forced labor and embracing the constructive role of civil society. With the latter, this also meant that the government remained in control of the narrative—now just with the non-profit sector as one additional tool. Having achieved tangible economic success in terms of GDP growth, the president launched a twin project to his “Action Strategy”, called the “New Uzbekistan 2022-2026”. Meant to pile on the success of the first wave of reforms, the new development plan indicates that the Uzbek head of state will continue to prioritize the economy above all else.

On the strictly political front, Mirziyoyev has been much more reluctant. When his first term in office drew to a close, he was re-elected by winning more than 80 percent of the vote. Closely monitoring the developments in Kazakhstan, the Uzbek president announced his own package of constitutional amendments, which he envisioned would be approved following a nation-wide referendum. Yet this one was hardly reformist in nature. Among the amendments he proposed were those denying the Republic of Karakalpakstan the right to independence. Naturally, this caused outrage that Mirziyoyev struggled to contain, which eventually forced him to withdraw his Karakalpakstan suggestions entirely. Mirziyoyev is intent on staying in power for a third term, which he might execute through an interplay between his constitutional amendments and the prerogative to call an early election.

The question that concerns many is Central Asia’s geopolitical environment. While observing the region and its neighbors, it is easy to take note of the pronounced roles of Russia and China. Both powers have an interest in maintaining stability in the region, even as their areas of competition seem likely to expand. The fact that the CSTO helped stabilize the situation during the January unrest inspired many analysts to argue that Russia would use this to exert more influence on Kazakhstan. But as the events that followed continue to demonstrate, Putin’s decision to send Russian troops into Ukraine—and the Western reaction to it—have eroded many of Moscow’s positions throughout the world. In a quick reversal of fortune, Russia has found itself in a position of having to depend on Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states for trade, transport corridors, and even diplomatic support. The region has dealt with these new developments cautiously, avoiding to side with Russia on most contested issues of 2022, but also carefully crafting its messaging for fear of exacerbating relations with Moscow.

Another effect of Russia in turmoil is the number of people who have fled to Central Asia in 2022. This adds layers of interesting implications for the region’s countries. One way to look at it is that many of the incoming Russians will drive growth and help spur economic activity across Central Asia. Another is that they will only add to the already sizeable Russian ethnic minority in the region, which too will affect both internal processes of these countries and their relations with foreign powers—first and foremost Russia itself. From a more consumerist angle, the influx of Russians has driven rent prices up, while other commodities have also become more expensive because of the reduced availability of the Russian market. A good side effect from all of this is that energy prices have also become higher, which has helped fill the budgets of resource-rich Central Asian states.

As perhaps the most consequential geopolitical actor in the region, China is channeling its influence through its investment and infrastructure undertakings, most notably the Belt and Road Initiative. In areas where Russia has traditionally been dominant, we are now seeing China assume a more prominent role. At the end of the day, Russia is simply no match for Chinese investments—in Central Asia or elsewhere. China may also begin to step out of the strictly economic domain, having already given unusually strong statements in support of the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan. One takeaway from this message is that China will not allow too much Russian interference in what was formerly known as its “backyard”. The other thing might be that China is willing to become more of a security guarantor in the time ahead.

One more competitor of China in the region may to some extent be the EU, which has made attempts to create its own infrastructure project to rival Beijing. The EU’s “Global Gateway” has been promoted heavily by top European diplomats, who made a point of their increasingly frequent visits to the Central Asian region. Faced with a prospect of particularly harsh energy deficits during winter, Europe needs as many alternative sources of energy as possible. Hence, its focus on Central Asia makes sense, both in terms of infrastructure connectivity and the energy required. The European bloc also points out its top position among foreign investors, stressing that it is unrivaled even by Russia and China. However, the EU is made of almost an entire continent of sovereign states, which cannot project power as a single geopolitical entity. What is telling is that Central Asian states have been very receptive of European initiatives, as they have been with many other interested parties.

Whether it is geopolitical maneuvering or their own reforms, Central Asian states are still looking for recipes that will work for Central Asians. Room for improvement of their internal processes certainly exists. With almost every outside party looking to play a role in Central Asia, countries of the region have been accommodating and cautious, which enables them to remain on good terms with everyone and promote a positive image of their region internationally. Living between great powers has thought Central Asians as much. Seeing their reforms through will ultimately attract them even more attention. International competition has thus far had positive contours, channeled through investment, trade, and opportunity. With everything that can still be achieved, it is in everyone’s interest that it stays that way.

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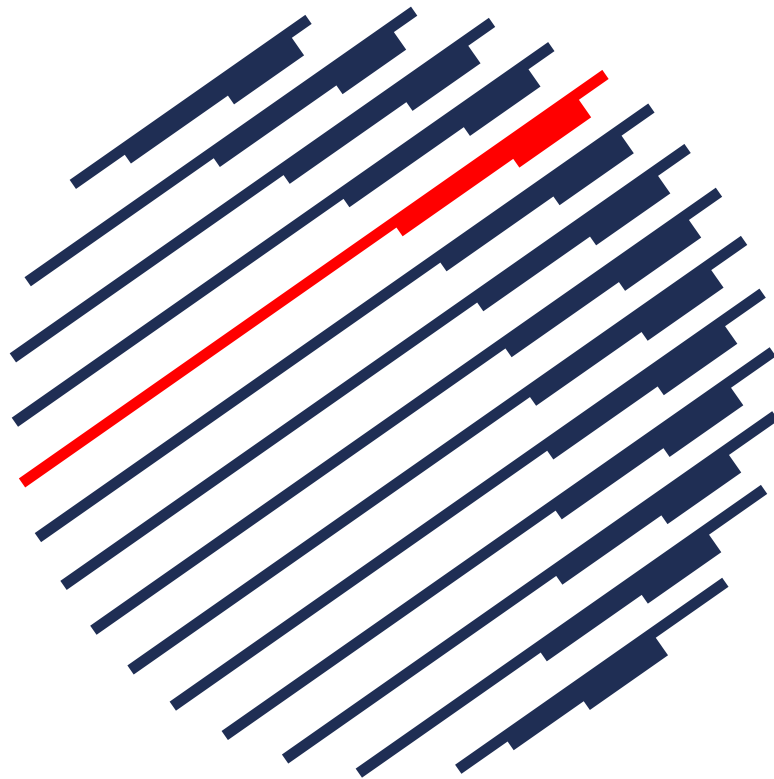
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